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*The way the MGM Grand Hotel looked the morning of Nov. 21, 1980.*

# What You Need To Know To Survive a Hotel Fire

**O**n the morning of Nov. 21, 1980, fire erupted at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas, Nev., with about 5,000 people inside at the time. Eighty-four died at the scene or in local hospitals, and, within a year, three more of the 679 who suffered fire-related injuries succumbed. This was the second largest hotel fire (in terms of lives lost) in U.S. history.

Investigation revealed that an improperly grounded (but never inspected) wire behind a wall in the resort's deli simmered, then burned undetected for hours before it flashed into a blaze that spread at a rate of 19 feet per second. Because of laundry chutes that failed to seal and defects in the heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems, a supposedly smoke-free stairwell that was a crucial escape route filled with smoke and trapped some victims. Others were cornered in smoke-filled hallways and rooms.

The investigation also revealed that fire marshals had insisted the casino have sprinklers installed during construction. The hotel, however, refused to pay for the \$192,000 system, and a county building official sided with the hotel. Authorities later said the sprinkler system could have prevented the disaster, which cost \$223 million in legal settlements.

About a thousand fires occur in hotels and motels every year. Frequent travelers need to learn how to survive. Pay attention to fire safety – not just the hotel's location and amenities – when planning a trip. Knowing what to do in a fire emergency is the key to surviving a hotel fire.

## Preparation Begins at Home

Before you leave home, pack a flashlight and portable smoke detector, as well as your travel alarm clock. The flashlight can guide you through a dark and smoky hall. A battery-operated smoke detector, placed on a hanger at the top of the door to your room, will alert you to possible fires when you're sleeping. Remember not to place the detector near

an air conditioner or in front of an air-supply duct, because the fresh-air flow may prevent smoke-filled air from setting off the alarm.

## Check the Exits

As soon as you check in, take time to identify exits, stairwells and escape routes. Count the number of doorways between your room and the nearest exit. Notice which side of the hall the exit is on and whether an ice machine or other objects block the way.

See if the exit is usable. Notice how the lock opens. (*If it trips the fire alarm, that's as far as you can go without talking to hotel staff.*) If you can open the door without tripping the alarm, do so, and investigate the stairwell to be sure it is clear.

See if the door locks from the stairway side. If it does, once you enter the stairwell, you will be able to exit only at the ground floor. Do not plan to use the elevator because the shaft sucks smoke and heat upward. Also, smoke and heat may affect the elevator controls or melt hoist cables.

Next, prepare your room. The window offers an alternate escape route. Try the latches. See if the ground, roof or deck is within safe dropping distance—about two stories. Finally, put your room key on the nightstand or in a clothing pocket so you can find it easily.

## Getting Out

In the event of a fire, you probably will be awakened by an alarm, a phone call, the smell of smoke, or shouting in the hall. Take your key, roll out of bed, and crawl to the door. Don't stand because smoke and toxic gases rise. The air just 5 feet from the floor could be filled with deadly carbon monoxide.

Next, feel the door. If it or the knob is hot, don't open it. If it is cold, open it slowly, and be prepared to shut it quickly if smoke pours in.



Check the hall. If it's clear, you have a choice to make: Stay in your room, or head for the fire exit.

**Caution:** In making your decision, consider the fact the stairwell door or the room door may lock behind you. If either happens, you have no retreat. If you still decide to leave your room and there is any trace of smoke, stay low—crawl, if necessary—along the wall, counting doorways to the exit. When you reach the stairwell, hold firmly onto the guardrail and walk down.

If fire and smoke are thick at the lower levels of the stairwell or hallway, which happens as smoke cools, turn around and pray that you can get back to your room. Do not attempt to go to the roof, as the stairs may not exit at the roof, or that exit may be locked.

### Staying Put

If your room door is hot, or if smoke is dense in the hall, you have no choice but to remain in your room. You still can survive. You may be able to drop to the ground safely if you are on the first or second story. If you are higher, don't jump because you could be hurt seriously or killed.



A \$1.5 million blaze destroyed this former tavern, turned hotel, turned apartment building in Gettysburg, Pa., on Feb. 10, 1983.

*Photo by Donald J. Reimer*

If you can't leave through the window, signal for help. First try to telephone, then hang a sheet out the window to signal firefighters. Get fresh air. Flip on the bath - room fan to vent smoke from your room, then open the top and bottom sections of the window about 3 inches to let fresh air in at the bottom, and ventilate smoke at the top.

If smoke and flames are rising outside, keep the windows shut. If the outside air is clear, make a tent over your head with a wet blanket and open the bottom half enough to put your head out the window. If the window won't open, you may not want to break it because you won't be able to close it in case smoke appears.

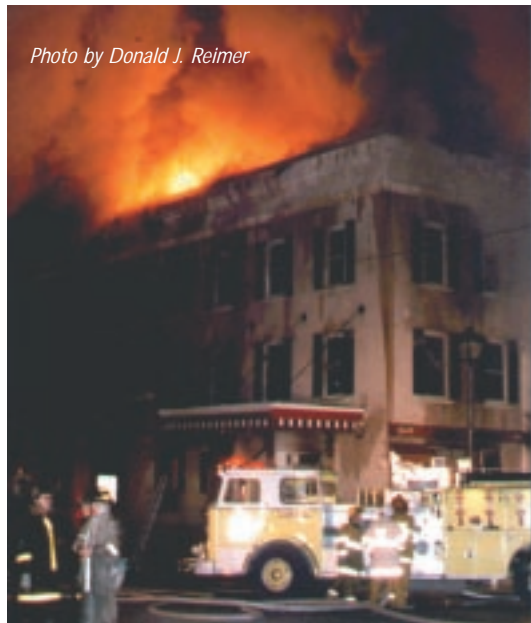
Fill the bathtub. You can use the water for firefighting. Use wet towels and sheets around cracks in the doorway and any place else smoke can seep into the room. If the door and walls get hot, use ice buckets to bail water and throw it on them.

### Hints for Meeting Planners

If you are a convention or meeting planner, you should pay particular attention to fire safety. Before scheduling an event, investigate the hotel's procedures for fire detection, its alarm systems, the provisions for extinguishing fires, the exit routes, and employee training for fire emergencies. The hotel should have an alarm system and, ideally, should have an automatic sprinkler system, particularly for large exhibition areas and other wide areas. If you are planning a large trade show, be sure the hotel provides services to remove packing materials quickly from the exhibit area.

A general rule to keep in mind is that street-level meeting rooms are the easiest to evacuate. Rooms above the seventh floor are more hazardous because fire ladders may not reach that high. Hotel-basement meeting rooms may not be a wise choice, because meeting participants must climb up stairs in the same direction smoke and flames will travel.

The meeting room should have adequate exits. A rule of thumb is that 50 to 300 people require two exits. Three hundred to 1,000 need three exits, and



*Photo by Donald J. Reimer*

more than 1,000 should have four or more exits. The exits should be lit brightly, not blocked by furniture or curtains, and should be opened easily. They never should be locked or chained. Seating or exhibit arrangements should allow enough aisle space for quick evacuation. You should familiarize yourself with exits and escape routes. Make sure the hotel's floor plan is posted visibly, and walk the entire escape route. Hallways, exits and stairwells should be clear of obstructions. Stairs should have emergency lighting, and elevators should be marked clearly to prevent use in a fire.

After you check the escape route, ask the hotel staff to remove any furniture that is in the way. Also ask them to point out the location of automatic sprinklers and smoke detectors. Locate fire extinguishers in case of small wastepaper-basket fires, but call the fire department before trying to control even a small fire. Arrange to listen to the fire alarm

and find out who on the hotel staff is responsible for calling the fire department. If you spot a fire, though, contact the fire department first, and then alert the hotel switchboard on the house telephone.

Before your meeting, instruct attendees about alarms, escape routes, and general fire-safety procedures.

## The Best Protection

No matter what safety measures a hotel and its staff provide, the best protection in a fire emergency is an alert individual who knows what to do. **A**

*Thanks go to Don Bowman, district chief of the Chicago Fire Prevention Bureau, for pointing me to information on their website ([www.ci.chi.il.us/Fire/Prevention/HotelFire.html](http://www.ci.chi.il.us/Fire/Prevention/HotelFire.html)), which helped me assemble this article.—Ed.*

## Is Your Hotel Equipped To Protect You?

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) recommends that you choose a hotel protected by both smoke alarms and a sprinkler system. That's good advice, unless you're a federal employee who travels. In that case, it's the law—PL 101-391, to be exact. Under this law (Hotel and Motel Fire Safety Act of 1990), all federal employees who travel must stay in hotels or motels deemed fire-safe.

Public Law 101-391, which applies to all places of public accommodation, including properties where federally funded meetings and conferences are held, requires each room to have a hard-wired, single-station smoke detector (according to NFPA 72, National Fire Alarm Code). Each room also must have an automatic sprinkler (according to NFPA 13 or 13R). Properties three stories or higher are exempt from the sprinkler requirement.

The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) is charged with compiling, maintaining and publishing the National Master List of facilities that comply with the law. While the original target was federal employees, the USFA hopes the list will serve as a guideline for everyone who travels. To be put on the Master List, a property must meet specific criteria for certain fire-protection systems.



The list, which is extensive, can be found on the USFA website at [www.usfa.fema.gov](http://www.usfa.fema.gov). Users can search the list by property name or location. A printed copy of the list can be ordered on the website or by contacting the USFA at (301) 447-1000. If a property isn't on the list, however, it doesn't necessarily mean that it isn't fire-safe. It could mean that the facility hasn't applied to get on the list. Applications are available on the website. **A**

*If you're a government traveler who gets booked into a hotel or motel where any of the required protective measures are inadequate or not available, report it to your local Scheduled Airlines Ticket Offices (SATO). Never stay in a lodging site that is not up to code. Overseas travelers should be extra cautious because foreign hotels and motels are not held to the same standards.—Ed.*